

Aromatherapy: Essential Oils in Healthcare

What is clinical aromatherapy?

Clinical aromatherapy is when essential oils are used to improve a patient's physical, mental, or emotional health and comfort. This type of therapy doesn't treat or cure disease — rather, it's used to ease symptoms and promote well-being.

What is an essential oil?

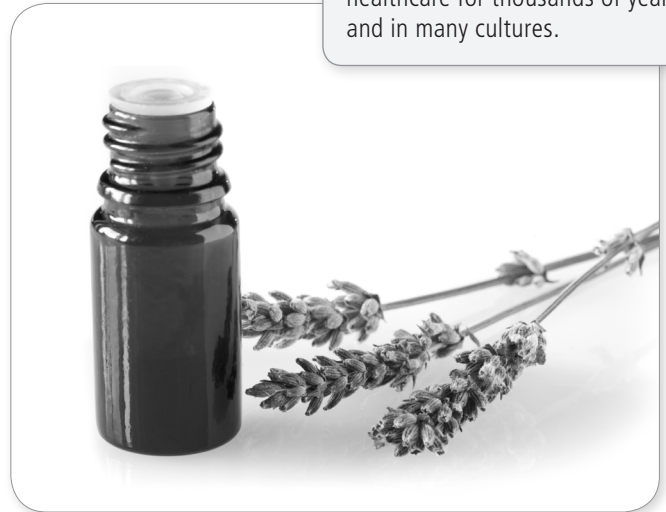
Essential oils come from the fragrant part of different plants (flowers, trees, and herbs). They are processed in natural ways, with no added ingredients. Since they come straight from the plant, pure essential oils have a different effect than do artificial fragrances that may have a similar scent. It's their unique chemical makeup — not just their aroma — that has a therapeutic effect.

Many different essential oils are used in clinical aromatherapy. Each essential oil has a unique chemical structure that determines its use in health treatments. For example, mandarin oil can ease nausea, and lavender is helpful for relaxation and pain relief.

How is clinical aromatherapy used in the hospital?

Clinical aromatherapy is often combined with other complementary treatments, like massage and acupuncture. Increasingly, it's also used alongside standard medical treatment. (When complementary and standard treatments are used together, it's sometimes called "integrative medicine.") Rather than a treatment or cure, aromatherapy is a way to ease symptoms such as pain, anxiety, and nausea. It's also used to improve mood, aid relaxation, and make you feel more healthy and at ease.

Essential oils have been used in healthcare for thousands of years and in many cultures.



How do essential oils work?

The oils chosen for your treatment will depend on your needs. Since not everyone responds in the same way to a particular essential oil, your provider may try a few different oils to find the best therapy for you.

Here's how the therapy works:

- Essential oils are breathed in or placed on the skin. (If the oil is to be placed on your skin, it's first mixed with a bland "carrier" oil or lotion. Essential oils can be intense, and this helps prevent a skin reaction.)
- The essential oil's fragrance enters the body through sensitive nerve cells in the nose. These nerve cells send signals to the brain.
- In the brain, the signals influence how you experience other sensations and input. In turn, this changes your experience of things like pain, nausea, anxiety, and other symptoms.

Are essential oils safe?

Essential oils are safe — but only when used by people trained in clinical aromatherapy. In the hospital, a nurse will administer the oils and will use oils purchased by the hospital. This helps make sure that the essential oils are high quality and used in the right way — and at the right time — to support your care.

Essential oils are highly concentrated substances, and some do carry risks. For example, some essential oils are poisonous if swallowed. Others can cause skin reactions, trigger breathing problems in people with asthma, or interact with some medications. To use essential oils safely, follow the direction of someone trained in clinical aromatherapy — and follow these general safety tips:

- Check with your doctor before starting clinical aromatherapy. Some people are highly sensitive to these oils, and some oils may interfere with medication or other parts of your treatment.
- Keep essential oils away from children and pets.
- Do not swallow or eat essential oils — many oils are toxic or dangerous when swallowed.
- Never apply undiluted essential oils to your skin. Also, keep in mind that your skin may be more sensitive to the sun when you're using essential oils. Cover up when you go in the sun.
- Be considerate of how the oil's smell affects other people. Don't use an essential oil diffuser, for example.